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ABSTRACT

This paper demonstrates the use of teacher-made and parent-made instructional games to practice basic skills, as an alternative to traditional homework assignments. The game formats provide mainstreamed mildly handicapped students with the additional practice necessary to achieve mastery, in an environment that is more motivating and allows for enjoyable family involvement. The differences between types of homework assignments (practice, preparation, and extension) are described, and results of a poll of 500 rural parents of fifth-grade students about their views on homework are noted. The paper concludes with guidelines for planning a parent night, to present the idea to parents and to provide them with opportunities to create their own games and materials to take home. (JDD)

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Alternative Homework for the Mildly Handicapped Elementary Student: Try Gaming!

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Introduction

Homework as part of the schooling experience is generally accepted and expected. This is true despite the inconclusive evidence found in the literature regarding its usefulness (Friesen, 1979; Freisen, 1978; Harding, 1979; Paschal, Weinstein, and Walberg, 1984). Because of the supervision and guidance required of many mildly handicapped students to complete academic tasks, one may further question its effectiveness for this population. Some parents, however, wish to have homework for their children to see their progress first hand and to feel a part of their child's learning by providing needed assistance to them at home. In other school districts, homework may be mandatory for certain grades. Homework can be provided in a variety of formats. This workshop will demonstrate the use of teacher and parent made instructional games to practice basic skills as an alternative to traditional homework assignments.

Homework in a gaming format may provide additional practice for a student in a motivational manner. The child with learning difficulties in a specific skill area often receives additional time on that skill within the normal instructional programs. Therefore, instead of having to spend one hour on a weak area, that student may

be spending one hour in a regular classroom, one hour in a resource room, and his parents are providing additional time in this area during homework. Altering the home activities by changing them to game formats may provide a child additional practice but in a more motivating fashion. Furthermore, it allow for enjoyable family involvement with that child in a structured instructional manner.

Background Research

Teacher preparation programs often devote little time to the area of homework. It is often assumed that new teachers will have a feel for what is appropriate. This may not be true.

Lee and Pruitt (1979) have designed a homework taxonomy looking at it as either for practice, preparation, or extension of what is being taught in the classroom. It may be advisable to define these options here.

Practice refers to exercises to reinforce newly learned skills. This is frequently such activities as working arithmetic problems, memorizing facts in history, etc. Research shows that these activities are questionable when assigned in mass to all students in a class (Freisen, 1979, Austin, 1979). Homework can be effective only when it is individually prescribed and matched to the background and learning ability of the students (LaConte,1981). This is an important point to

remember for the mildly handicapped students who may be mainstreamed into regular classes.

Preparation homework is where the student seeks out information to come prepared for the lecture the following school day. This often involves reading chapters of the text or gathering information from the library, newspapers, etc.(LaConte, 1981). LaConte (1981) believes that to be effective teachers must set guidelines for the students by telling them exactly what to read and look for. Teachers must also be aware of the length or difficulty of a reading passage. A study has shown that teachers often underestimate the time it takes for students to complete the reading that is assigned (Scaglione, 1974).

The third type of homework is extension homework. These are ones which encourage a child to apply, synthesize, research or study a topic in a personal way. These are frequently long term activities. As LaConte (1981) points out, it focuses on "production" rather than "reproduction". Products are usually student initiated.

The workshop will focus on alternatives for practice and extension assignments that can be individualized for the mildly handicapped child. They will help to personalize the assignments for these students.

Research just completed by the presenters polled about 500 rural parents of fifth grade students about their views on homework. The findings resulted in varied

comments. Some parents were very much in favor of homework. One parent commented, "The best teachers assign the most homework in relationship to the grade level. In my opinion, any teacher third grade or higher who never has homework assignments isn't worth the taxpayers money". Other parents are against homework. Some of these parents reported opposite views on homework such as this "Homework has destroyed what little family time we used to have as a family". When these parents were asked how much time the students spent on an average each day doing homework, the mean was 39 minutes. When the parents were asked how much time should be spent on homework daily the mean of their responses was 34 minutes. This does indicate that they are not totally against homework but would prefer somewhat less than is being assigned.

Friesen (1978) reviewed surveys, questionnaires and polls asked of parents and students regarding homework between the years of 1916 and 1978. He found that there were generally favorable views on homework. Both students and parents generally believed homework "helps them get better grades".

The interesting aspect about homework is that research is inconclusive in this respect. Friesen (1979) also looked at the results of 24 research studies on the effectiveness of homework to improve academic learning from 1923 to 1976. He found that the data neither supported nor refuted the effectiveness of homework.

Harding (1979) also summarized results of research from 1900-1979. No clear cut evidence was found proving the effectiveness of homework in improving pupil performance. Paschal, Weinstein, and Walberg (1984), however, have found in their analysis of 15 studies between the years of 1966 and 1981 that 85% of the studies favored the treatment groups that received homework. One can see that no definite conclusions regarding the necessity of homework can be drawn from the research thus far.

Therefore, teachers must weigh the value of the homework assignments they are giving students, especially those with mild handicaps. Can we expect parents to teach these children with unique learning needs? We are making the assumption that the parents have an educational level or the availability of resources to complete the assignments at home. This may not be the case. Why not turn homework into a fun activity for the entire family?

Implementation of Gaming

Three options exist for implementation of gaming formats for homework: a) Wait for parents to ask how they can assist their child at home and introduce the idea. b) Sell the idea to mainstream teachers by providing them with materials that will allow for easy implementation of"game-like" homework. c) Design parent workshops to sell parents on the idea and give them opportunities to create their own games and materials to take home.

In the rural areas where many families live far from

public library facilities where parents could seek their own resources. these parent and student made materials can fulfill a parents' need to contribute to the skill development of their handicapped children in an enjoyable fashion. The parent night idea presents a pleasant and less stressful way for a parent to get involved in his child's education instead of the usual IEP meetings.

Providing sufficient practice and review of new skills to the point of mastery for mainstreamed mildly handicapped children is difficult. Gaming can be used to provide these children the additional practice necessary to achieve mastery through the learning games. Regular class teachers will be willing to participate when they see the simplicity of preparing and updating these game-like materials.

Planning a Parent Night

1. List the skills in which your students need additional practice.

2. Prepare or locate sample materials that would be appropriate for the students' age and learning needs.

3. Gather the supplies necessary to create the learning materials. Be sure to have enough of everything to allow the parents and their children to complete the materials that night. This would probably include tagboard, scissors, markers, tape, glue, pictures, stickers, rulers, stencils, blank flashcards, something to use as game markers such as lids, painted rocks, colored

pieces of tagboard, etc.

4. Solicit the participation of other teachers and aides in the school system. You will need about one assistant for every three sets of parents and children. They can help the parent select the materials appropriate for their child and assist in their preparation. One of the adults may be asked to laminate or apply clear contact paper to the items as they are completed.

5. Be sure to have duplicate copies of the directions for each game available for the parents to take home. Large zip lock type plastic bags are good for materials with many pieces.

6. Make a list of each of the materials prepared by each parent and child. This will allow you to send home new question cards, game pieces, etc. as the child progresses in the skill area during the year. You may add to the difficulty of the games by adding more pieces.

7. Leave the parents some preprinted tips to go along with the games. Landers (1984) recommends that parents learn to acknowledge their childs' answers as true effort, avoid unnecessary corrections and remind the child of his potential to complete the activities. Parents must be guided into developing realistic expectations for their children. Wesson, Wilson and Madlebaum (1988) have also designed means to adapt games to make them allow for high student response rates. These ideas have been integrated into the learning games that will be demonstrated here.

There will be success in the gaming experiences if teachers select appropriate materials and parents have reasonable expectations.

Summary

The handouts you will receive will get you started on the road to having your own parent/student learning materials night. Enthusiasm for learning is contagious. Gaming has an inherent motivational value for most children. These activities were particularly effective in a low income community where homes were lacking in educational materials. You can get your parents actively involved in their child's practice of basic skills without destroying the at home family times. Everyone can participate and it is fun for all.

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